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The dirt on Rico: EPA wants action soon

By Kara Tatone

How hazardous is the lead contamination underlying Rico's backyards? The Environmental Protection Agency said this week it's enough to warrant an almost immediate cleanup of the town.

EPA officials Wednesday night handed the town an approximate six-week deadline to decide how it will approach its contamination problem before the agency makes the decision itself. Test results released this week showed lead levels in residential soils well above EPA safety standards.

But Rico officials said those results do not provide enough information to allow them to come up with a cleanup plan in the time allotted.

"They've tested only a small fraction of the land in Rico, they've sampled a quarter of the houses, and decided there are high levels that they knew and we knew years ago," Rico Town Attorney Eric Heil said.

"The best of what the town can make of this is they're asking us to move fast & we feel like we're being pressured without all the information."

Rico residents, landowners and town officials packed the Rico Town Hall Wednesday night to get the word from EPA officials and toxicologists to decide on the future of the town's high lead level soils.

At the meeting EPA officials announced that its concern over the town's contamination levels has motivated the agency to push for a cleanup to start as early as this summer. In preparation for that effort, the agency asked the town to decide how it would like to approach the cleanup:

voluntarily, with help from former mine owner Atlantic Ridgefield Company or in a voluntary program.

But Ehlert said Thursday that, realistically, the effort would likely have to be undertaken by either her agency or ARCO - not the town.

"We're hesitant to say voluntary cleanup will work at this level," Ehlert said. "It

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looks like two things are driving [the cleanup] - the EPA and ARCO. In order for us to see that something will be done, we're proceeding to prepare to do the work ourselves."

Final results of soil analysis on 54 private and town-owned tested sites confirmed weighty levels of lead contamination on about 10 sites last month, and found some slightly elevated levels of arsenic and zinc in others.

But EPA chief of site assessment managers Debra Ehlert said the agency's main concern is lead, and, though a Superfund designation for Rico - a brand that could damage the town's financial capabilities and ward off potential land and business owners from the growing community - isn't planned, Ehlert said, it hasn't been ruled out as a possibility.

"We've heard about this town and the trepidation of having this [Superfund] stigma, but we haven't taken listing totally off the table yet. But we'll listen to the community," she said. "And listing itself takes a long time - we don't have that much time to deal with what we need to deal with. But we maintain the authority to do what a Superfund allows us to do."

The federal agency starts considering cleanup action when lead levels over 400 parts per million are found - a few Rico residential sites showed levels as high as 3,000 ppm. According to results from the Rico soil samples taken in the fall, eight sites tested over 2,000 ppm and four tested at more than 3,000 ppm levels, which Ehlert said are the reason the EPA wants to start a cleanup on an accelerated level.

According to Ehlert, the difference between an EPA cleanup and another party performing the job is, "we clean up yards to our satisfaction, we leave a letter we're no longer concerned, and residents get a clean bill of health, a very important document if the owner wants to sell the house, et cetera," she said.

At Wednesday's meeting, EPA officials showed slides of an EPA cleanup site in Utah to give residents an idea of what could happen to local soils and yards if the agency takes over cleanup. The work may involve backhoe excavations to scrape the yard and dust control.

"The bottom line is we're going to digest the information," said Rico Board of Trustees

member Steve Snelling. "Cleanup is imminent, time is flexible. It looks like they're trying to do their job and being thorough, which might mean a lot of things. There are a lot of unanswered questions on the line."

That Rico soils have elevated levels of toxins is no mystery - the town has historically been a mining community, and such areas are known to frequently be the site of significant contamination.

"In general what we found is comparable to what we find in mining areas of the West," Ehlert said.

Rico officials in recent years have sought help to solve what it has seen as a more pressing problem as a result of its mining history than lead levels in its yards - an abandoned mine that constantly spews contaminated water into the Dolores River basin.

Looking for help to fix that issue, Rico sought EPA assistance in cleaning up the mine, but last fall found that, when agency officials showed up, they started testing soil, nurturing local fears that the town was being primed for a broad

Superfund designation.

EPA officials have said that, though Superfund is unlikely for the town, its duty is to protect the health of the local residents through whatever means it deems necessary.

"When the EPA comes to a neighborhood it's not one house, but the whole neighborhood," said Ehler. "We were not only looking at the tunnel, river & the surrounding area."

An EPA toxicologist explained the dangers of lead physically encountered in high doses.

"The risk-based part of this lead at elevated levels is not a good thing, but it has to be ingested, inhaled, through skin, has to be in contact physically, not like radon or a gas," Ehler said.

Lead particles in the air or water can be hazardous, and models with 3,000-plus ppm models have proven high enough to alarm the federal Centers for Disease Control. High lead levels in the blood can impact the central nervous system, and interfere with a child's development of the nervous system.

"The numbers that the EPA uses to determine what is and not safe levels have changed dramatically over the years & what was medically considered innocuous, later is considered highly toxic by the EPA," Snelling said. "But if there is some toxicity that can be mitigated by a cleanup it is probably within the town's best interest to deal with it."

The Rico board will discuss lead contamination and cleanup options at its monthly meeting on Wednesday at 7 p.m. at the town hall.

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